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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the conflicting leadership styles of two women administrators of a nonprofit organization, the Miracle Riders Program in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It also offers suggestions for how the executive director and a board member/program manager could work together toward a shared organizational objective. Miracle Riders, sponsored by United Cerebral Palsy of Tuscaloosa, is a therapeutic horseback riding program for children and adults. Data were gathered through interviews and participant observation. An analysis of the two leadership styles concluded that the executive director operated in the public arena, was most comfortable with formal structure, and used a rational management style. The manager operated in the private arena, preferred working within informal structure, and utilized a nonrational management style. In order for the two administrators to attain their common objective of developing the program as an independent nonprofit organization, they must first develop a collegial relationship and focus on the task at hand by using a collaborative, problem-solving approach. (LMI)

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A Dialectic Analysis of Leadership, Communication and Conflict Management Styles

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My heart races as I leave my car on the dusty driveway and walk towards the open barn door. Jumps and barrels are scattered within the outdoor ring that encircles a field beside the entrance. What at first appears to be a loading ramp for hay or grain is actually a wheelchair ramp for mounting disabled students onto the backs of horses and ponies. Upon entering the barn, a fat dalmatian eager for attention jumps up to me for a pat on the head. I am momentarily stunned until my eyes make the adjustment from bright sunlight to speckled shade. I hear the once very familiar sounds of restless horses stomping their hooves and snorting in anticipation of a scoop of grain. And, the long-missed smell of well-oiled saddles and fresh hay blends with the aroma of dirty stalls and the must of an old barn.

I am at Hope Farm in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, for a volunteer training class for the Miracle Riders program. "You must be Jenny!" announces an energetic woman bounding out of an office door. "I'm Cathy. C'mon with me and we can talk while I feed and water the horses. Do you mind helping?" Thus begins my acquaintance with Cathy, the volunteer administrator for Miracle Riders.

Therapeutic Horseback Riding

Miracle Riders began two years ago as a one-time horse show event sponsored by United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of Tuscaloosa. The event was so successful that clients and family members encouraged UCP to implement an ongoing therapeutic horseback riding program for children and adults. Cathy, a UCP board

member and the primary coordinator of the horse show, took the reins and has since been the driving force behind Miracle Riders.

Miracle Riders currently serves 22 clients with a $33,000 annual budget through UCP. Its annual budget is complemented with monetary donations specifically designated to Miracle Riders and by in-kind contributions such as sand for the ring and labor to construct an indoor office and restroom at the barn. As the volunteer administrator, Cathy coordinates virtually all aspects of the program. She recruits and trains volunteers to assist during lessons. She also schedules classes and tours with clients who range from disabled adults to girl scouts.

In addition to managing the day-to-day activities of the program, Cathy also represents Miracle Riders at the executive level by serving as vice president of the UCP board of directors. 33 individuals serve as "working" board members on a three-year rotating basis. Cathy is serving her fourth year as a board member.

My acquaintance with Cathy leads me to a meeting with Becky, who is the executive director of UCP. Becky has an impressive resume as a former president of the UCP board and industry experience as a human resources manager and operations manager. She is a full-time employee of the board since 1991. As the executive director, Becky manages a $300,000 annual budget that supports six programs (including Miracle Riders) serving 50-60 children a week during the school term and 30-50 children throughout the summer. Her office is located in a modest

building near Druid City Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Becky's primary goal for UCP is to "build a new building that will serve as a focal point for UCP in southwestern Alabama. We need a 'home-base' for our outreach programs," she explains. Becky approaches this goal with a five year fundraising agenda to obtain the means for constructing the UCP office while maintaining and improving upon existing programs. Her long term strategy appears to be logical with a sharp eye for revenue to expense issues. Regarding the Miracle Riders program, Becky says that the board views the program as "valuable, but we support its goal to eventually become independent."

Cathy freely tells me of her immediate need for Miracle Riders to become independent of UCP. "All I need is $33,000 and then we can go our own way and be rid of all the negative stuff from Becky," explains Cathy. "I'm tired of our program being treated as the step-child. She (Becky) didn't even include Miracle Riders in her year-end presentation of activities and budget items to the board. She purposefully ignored us!"

It's intriguing for me to see, first hand, how two leaders with similar goals for Miracle Riders can be at such odds with each other.

The Present Study

Barge (1994) defines conflict as a social phenomenon that is woven into the fabric of human relationships, making it an issue of communication. Conflict emerges when we become dependent upon one another to meet our personal goals. This interdependence is

the catalyst for conflict between people who interact regularly, such as friends, colleagues, and spouses.

Researchers agree that conflict is an inevitable phenomenon of human interaction that is considered to be negative or positive, depending upon how it is managed. In the context of business and industry, well-managed conflict strengthens relationships and contributes to an organization's effectiveness and success (Tjosvold, 1993). Dealing with conflict openly by discussing difficult issues such as values and personal goals, assists parties in recognizing and resolving conflict. An underlying advantage of open discussions is that once people get to know each other they may be less apt to block solutions to the problems they collectively face.

On the other hand, individuals in an organization who choose to avoid conflict are promoting negative conflict (Tjosvold, 1993) as a short term solution. This approach usually backfires and creates greater problems.

Interpersonal communication, therefore, is a primary consideration in understanding conflict between individuals in an organization. Too often, according to Baker (1994), organizations make it very difficult for professionals to operate at high levels of interpersonal relations. The style of management and structure of the organization may create built-in barriers for those who strive for meaningful communication.

In order to operate at a high level of understanding of interpersonal problems, Baker (1994) suggests that individuals

need to strive for mutual understanding as a vehicle for working out an accommodation. This process begins when individuals accept the behavior of others as legitimate and try to understand the reasons for it. The key is to gain understanding -- not agreement or acceptance.

According to Arnold (1993), a conflict may be ego-centered when individuals are in conflict due to disagreements over philosophical issues such as value systems. This particular type of conflict may be gut-wrenching and emotionally charged.

In the book Hidden conflict in Organizations, authors Deborah Kolb and Linda Putnam (1992) present a dialectic approach to the study of organizational conflict. The authors' approach is a way of considering the relationship between traditional features of organizational conflict and their opposition. An example of a duality that is common in interpersonal communication in the workplace is competition and cooperation (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). Competition and cooperation as bipolar opposites are not merely issues that are different from one another, "they form duality in that they mutually exclude and simultaneously include each other" (p. 16).

Kolb and Putnam's (1992) dialectic approach to the study of conflict in organizations includes the examination of the following dualities: public and private, formal and informal, and rational and nonrational.

The data for this study is obtained from conducting interviews with Cathy and Becky and by using the

participant/observer approach as a volunteer for Miracle Riders. I will describe and analyze their leadership styles using the dialectical approach as a framework for understanding the organizational conflict of this non-profit organization. I will end with a discussion of possible strategies for the leaders of UCP and Miracle Riders.

CONFLICT ARENA

Public ---------- Private

Kolb and Putnam's (1992) dialectic analysis of the public/private arena is a look at the context in which the leaders' interact. This is the setting that provides the backdrop for the formation of conflict. The public side of the arena is characterized by conflicts that are sanctioned, authorized or labeled as disputes. For example, a dispute brought before a labor board is a public conflict. The preferred approach to resolving conflict in the public arena is through confrontation. According to the authors, confrontation, in this context, refers to overt discussion of the conflict which leads to positive alternatives such as negotiation, collaboration, and mutual problem solving.

The opposite of the public arena is the private arena. Unlike the characteristics of the public arena, the private arena features disputes that occur as covert or hidden conflict (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Individuals who operate in the private arena often avoid confrontation.

According to the model, the preferred course of action for dealing with conflict in the private arena is to quietly build a "behind the scenes" coalition while outwardly demonstrating tolerance and accommodation. These individuals create their own norms for handling the conflict.

I surmise that Becky operates in the public sector of the conflict arena based upon how she speaks about UCP and Miracle Riders. Becky's response to a question regarding the possibility of conflict between the board and Miracle Riders caught me by surprise. "There's no conflict between the board and Miracle Riders."

At one point in our discussion, Becky pointed out the fact that Miracle Riders serves only 22 students for 16 weeks each year. "With a budget of $33,000," she explains in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "UCP could provide a year-round program for 50 clients in a five county area. The board has to examine the numbers." She continued to explain that all budget decisions for UCP programs, including Miracle Riders, are decided by a board vote.

Becky exemplifies the public conflict arena by purporting the use of the sanctioned rituals for handling controversial issues. Her reference to the board on several occasions illustrates her preference for following the public norms.

During our interview, Becky repeatedly compliments Cathy's tremendous efforts to create and maintain the therapeutic riding program. She even laughingly confesses to knowing nothing about

horses. Her direct answers to my questions leave me with the impression that she would opt to confront conflict in a positive manner. Her leadership style in this regard is one of integrity.

It is important to note that I meet with Becky on just one occasion. I have the opportunity to meet with Cathy on several occasions, and have worked for her as a "sidewalker" during the therapeutic riding lessons. She is very open and probably feels comfortable sharing private information with me. This may prompt her to speak with me in a less formal style that Becky's approach, which was quite formal.

Another limitation that bears discussion is the fact that I have not observed Becky and Cathy together. Therefore, my observation and analysis of the nature of their relationship and interaction is based on what they say about each other.

As the volunteer administrator on lesson days, Cathy exemplifies positive and effective leadership qualities. Per her request, 24 enthusiastic volunteers of all ages show up at the barn at 8:30 in the morning. The volunteers are generally excited and eager to participate. No one grumbles or complains about their assignments for the day. As a participant, I am caught up in the spirit of giving and teamwork that pervades the barn.

Although Cathy is responsible for coordinating most of the pre-and post lesson activities, she delegates her authority to the volunteer equestrian instructor once the riders enter the ring. After the lesson, the riders leave the ring and are once

again in Cathy's charge. Her likeable personality and direct approach to getting things done makes it easy for us to ask questions and work long hours in the hot sun. In her role as the board liaison, however, Cathy appears to operate in the private conflict arena. As is typical of this type of individual, Cathy speaks to me about the executive director in the presence of other volunteers. Her comments are mostly negative. For example, one day in the crowded barn office, Cathy said the following:

> Becky doesn't even like horses. She never comes out to watch or help out with the lessons. I know she has a hands-on relationship with the other programs. This program doesn't mean anything to her. She's jealous because the newspaper loves to take photos of the kids on the ponies, so we get all the press. Betty feels threatened so she tries to dismiss our importance.

Cathy exhibits poor leadership skills when making personal statements to disqualify Becky. By doing so, Cathy pins herself into the private arena of avoiding confrontation.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Formal ---------- Informal

Kolb and Putnam (1992) believe that conflict is governed by organizational and social structures. The formal structure, like the public arena, is characterized by treating conflict with established procedures that are sanctioned by the organization.

Thus, conflict management in a formal social structure is institutionalized. In formal disputes, organizations often designate individuals such as a human resource specialist or an ombudsman to mediate conflict resolution (Kolb & Bartnek, 1992).

Conflict management in the informal social structure is characterized by unofficial positions and gossip. Informal disputes, according to Kolb and Putnam, center on the actions and processes of individuals within the organization rather than on the function of conflict management officials (1992). For example, informal norms of conflict resolution may include gripe sessions and the pursuit of hidden agendas.

Once again, Becky and Cathy's leadership and communication styles lead them to opposite sides of the social structure. Becky sanctions the policies and procedures as determined by the governing boards of the Tuscaloosa and national UCP administrative offices. She is a part of the formal social structure. Cathy, on the other hand, plays a major role in developing a new set of customs and norms at Miracle Riders that set the stage for how the group manages conflict. She is a part of the informal social structure.

Both Cathy and Becky have specific goals for their organizations. For example, Cathy wants to obtain a grant for $33,000 so that Miracle Riders can become an independent non-profit organization. She is hoping that I can help her with this project. In the past few months, I have provided Cathy with information about obtaining grants and non-profit status. To my

knowledge, Cathy has not read this information. She is unfamiliar with the procedures for obtaining a non-profit status. It seems somewhat naive to predict that $33,000 is all that's needed to spring Miracle Riders from the UCP family. Obviously, her estimate does not include the costs of administrative services currently provided by UCP. Indeed, Cathy has not prepared a long-term plan for fundraising.

Cathy has an unofficial approach to managing the conflict of breaking away from UCP. It seems that Becky and other experts from national UCP could provide valuable input to assist her with a long-term strategy. Cathy's inclination to avoid the issue strains her relationship with Becky and stunts the growth of Miracle Riders.

Whereas Cathy leans to the informal side of the social structure scale, Becky's leadership and communication style tips to the formal side. An example of how Becky confronts conflict and change by following official rules and procedures is her development of a five year strategy to raise funds for a new building. Along with the new structure comes new programs and services for clients. UCP's ability to reach clients increases.

In June of this year, the UCP board is going on a retreat to fine-tune the strategy. It is also an opportunity for members to brainstorm additional ideas and dreams for UCP. This process, sanctioned by the governing board, is an ideal opportunity for Becky to promote her ideas to the members. By including all members in the plan, Becky increases the opportunity for support.

CONFLICT ORIENTATION

Rational --------- Nonrational

Rationality focuses on the orientation to conflict, or the way disputes should be handled between individuals in an organization (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). It is easy to conclude that rationality captures the logical, forthright characteristics of conflict resolution. We know these characteristics from the formal and public arenas.

The nonrational approach is impulsive and emotional. This approach is compatible for those who find themselves in the informal, private scenarios. Whereas the rational approach is strategic in nature, the nonrational conflict resolution probably involves impromptu, situational solutions.

Becky's style of management fits the rational approach to handling conflict. She is geared towards detailed analysis of a problem and the consensus of the board to ensure that the best solution is considered. Cathy on the other hand, fits the nonrational approach to handling conflict. She has the passion and desire to make Miracle Riders a success. She could be unstoppable once she combines her gumption with the leadership skills she demonstrates when coordinating riding lessons. Her nonrational approach with the board and the executive director, however, could alienate potential supporters.

Cathy and Becky use a variety of leadership skills that impact how they communicate and manage conflict. Their styles, as viewed through the framework of the dialectic approach to

understanding organizations, are neither good/bad nor right/wrong in the sense that they are in opposition yet have the potential to compliment one another. Instead of centering on dissimilar values such as liking or disliking horses, Becky and Cathy have the potential to greatly impact their organization by focusing on shared values such as the desire to provide therapeutic services for disabled youth and adults.

The bottom-line is that Cathy and Becky need each other to reach their personal goals. Becky needs to take some chances and explore the future of Miracle Riders. This may require her to become involved with the program in order to understand its operations. She may need to step away from the safety of the board and join in on the Miracle Riders activities as a volunteer.

Cathy, on the other hand, needs to open up her organization to Becky. She should acknowledge that, as an executive board member, she has power over Becky. Becky may even feel threatened that Cathy wants her job. Although Cathy has told me that she's not interested in Becky's job, does Becky realize the truth?

Recommendations

I recommend three strategies to assist Cathy and Becky in obtaining their common objective of Miracle Riders becoming an independent organization. These strategies are based on my knowledge of their individual approaches to communicating in conflict situations and their demonstrated leadership skills.

The first strategy is for Cathy to develop an authentic, collegial relationship with Becky. I can assume that the UCP board recognizes the efforts of Cathy as an executive board member and as the volunteer administrator of Miracle Riders. The board sanctions the therapeutic riding program by providing it with operating funds since its inception two years ago.

Becky also enjoys the respect and confidence of the board as she is their full-time executive director. Surely she influences the board in many of its decisions.

If Cathy and Becky agree to work as a team, they could truly complement each other since each possesses a unique leadership style. They must first see each other as colleagues, according to Senge (1993), because dialogue can occur only when two people see each other as colleagues in a mutual quest for understanding. This involves interacting in an open, honest fashion.

Working on their personal relationship may be a difficult first step for both leaders. It will push Cathy to be upfront and open about her feelings. In the same sense, it will be difficult for Becky to feel comfortable discussing personal issues with Cathy. Becky may feel "naked" in an informal context.

Once Cathy and Becky establish an honest relationship and are interacting in a positive, open manner, they are ready for the next strategy of using the problem-solving approach to conflict management.

The problem-solving approach is a collaborative style in which both individuals attempt to achieve the best solution to the conflict (Barge, 1994). By using this approach to conflict, the leaders will focus on task and relational goals. Thus, the task is accomplished and their relationship is intact.

The next strategy is for Cathy to develop a business plan for Miracle Riders. The plan will include realistic financial projections and ideas for increasing the number of clients who may benefit from the program. Cathy will need to reach out to other volunteers for assistance. She will need Betty's expertise as well ask the advise of other board members and therapeutic riding program administrators. Included in this plan is a mission statement for Miracle Riders that reflects the mission of the UCP.

Once Miracle Riders is established as a bonified, respected program that provides quality services to a large client base in southwestern Alabama, then Cathy and Becky, along with board members and volunteers, are on the way to establishing it as an independent non-profit organization.

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